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Qian Liquan, Jujue yiwang: "1957 nian xue" yanjiu biji (Refusal to forget: Notes for "1957 studies")

Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 2007, 502 pp.

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- 1 Earlier in 2009, the Chinese Encyclopaedia Press (Zhongguo dabaikē quanshu chubanshe) published a collection of essays by Qian Liqun entitled *Refusal to forget*, the reissue of a 1999 work devoted to Lu Xun and diverse intellectual debates. The subject of the present review bears the same title, but deals with a forbidden issue on which the Chinese authorities remain silent and have refused to amend their verdict. For political, historical, and social reasons, the 1957 Anti-Rightist Movement constitutes a memory hole in the history of the People's Republic of China. The regime's legitimacy depends on the contention that such a coercive campaign was necessary, despite jurisdictional incoherencies and reparation demands. In fact all but 98 of the campaign's 550,000 victims have been rehabilitated, although without any compensation; it remains a matter of “rectification” (*gaizheng*) rather than of “rehabilitation” (*pingfan*). This political decision is compounded by an unfavourable historical context. The tragic event was never followed by the ideological relaxation that characterised the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, which was labelled a “catastrophe” through some sort of consensus: the “post-Anti-Rightist Campaign” period, on the other hand did not take place, or disappeared within the “post-Cultural Revolution” era. Finally, the regime's long-held dichotomy between the intelligentsia and the working class did not encourage empathy for a trauma regarded as having affected only intellectuals. Therefore, the construction of a collective memory is more difficult than in the case of the Cultural Revolution. However, that task is increasingly imperative as survivors are growing old and dying off.
- 2 Qian's work stems from a noble sentiment that implies an act of commitment. The Peking University emeritus professor was a direct witness to the events: he was a second-year student of journalism in that institution when he was branded a

“moderate rightist” (*zhongyou*). He spent the first four years of his retirement on a large-scale investigation of the campaign, the book under review being one of its first fruits. Although the university had been the venue for heated debates and then merciless repression, he met with a void in its official history, as he noted during the institution’s centenary celebrations in 1998. Qian carried out inquiries that led to a wealth of material: private correspondence, published or unpublished manuscripts, and stencilled texts that escaped destruction only because they served as incriminating evidence. He has organised his reflections on these documents – which he hopes will compensate for still inaccessible archives – around four major themes.

- 3 The book opens with a basic examination (p.19-72) of the crisis that gripped industry and rural life, which Qian regards as the cause of the blizzard that overtook intellectual opinion. His inquiries concern the workers’ and peasants’ difficulties as dealt with in intellectual debates, as well as the pernicious antagonism that Mao succeeded in introducing between the working classes and academia by declaring a “dictatorship of the masses” (*qunzhong zhuanzheng*). This social analysis is followed by a series of observations on the movements inside the Peking University campus around the symbolic date of 19 May 1957, when protest *dazibaos* burst on the scene. The choice of protagonists, Liu Diqi, Lin Xiling, and Tan Tianrong, helps the author trace the origins of the debates as well as of the repressive campaign, and to place them in national and international contexts: on the one hand the adoption of the Constitution in 1954, the dismissal of Gao Gang and Rao Shushi, the fight against Hu Feng, and the elimination of counter-revolutionaries the following year; and on the other, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the incidents in Poland and Hungary in 1956. These contextual elements catalysed a spirit of protest by reactivating the May Fourth tradition, which, after all, was born in this same institution in 1919. The leaders’ discourses are reflected in student publications such as *Honglou* (*Red building*), which displayed a poetic and youthful enthusiasm, *Public place* (*Guangchang*), virulent in its fulminating independence, as well as *Waves sift the sands* (*Lang tao sha*), which carried legalistic responses. A new “socialist democratic movement” loomed as the Party appeared worn down by corruption and bureaucratic sclerosis. The demand was for real democracy within the socialist system, which, the author holds, characterised the “rightist spirit” (*youpai jingshen*), although that generation of young students and teachers did not clearly conceptualise their thinking.
- 4 The eulogy to the “rightist spirit” leads into an homage to victims of repression in the third part of the book. Here, the author focuses on some relatively well-known figures. The story of He Fengming, exiled to the Jiabiangou farm in Gansu, as narrated by Yang Xianhui, focuses on one of the worst camps in the punitive system, while the case of Zhang Xianchi in Sichuan illustrates the cruel effectiveness of daily control in the name of the dictatorship of the masses, not to mention summary humiliations, persecutions, and condemnations. Totalitarianism failed, however, to snuff out “heresy”: this is shown in the last part of the book through three moving examples of people who carried the light through those dark years: Lin Zhao, an outstanding figure in the 19 May 1957 event who was executed in 1968, never ceased to demand freedom, democracy, and human rights; Gu Zhun kept up his pioneering and perilous research on the market mechanism within the socialist economy; Zhang Zhongxiao, victim of the anti-Hu Feng campaign, reflected in solitude and destitution on Hegelian philosophy, individual values, and the cultural origins of the totalitarian system. The book closes with a counterpoint in the form of a report on underground groups of student

"reactionaries" in 1957, such as "Sun column" (Taiyang zongdui) and "Group X" (X xiaozu), which, rather than upholding the May Fourth movement's liberal humanism, drew inspiration from the thoughts of Mao. But they took a reflective rather than dogmatic approach and denounced the system's abuses.

- 5 Qian's studies, which are presented as academic despite being limited to individual investigations, proceed from specific cases to take a certain longer-term view. They have achieved the author's aim of showing the continuity of a dictatorial policy in its implacable logic: a personality cult mixed with the Party's haloed status, in which the slightest criticism, howsoever justified, was treated as condemnable transgression. The Anti-Rightist Campaign serves as an exemplar of the state's compulsion to crush any deviant individual. The author deserves credit for having prepared the ground by unearthing some unknown documents, such as the writings of repressed students, and treating them with lucidity and empathy. Qian has been largely inspired by Lu Xun, on whose works he is an expert. In entitling the book *Refusal to forget*, the author is inspired more by concern for fact and compassionate humanism than by philosophical, psychological, or literary motives: there is little in the way of analysis on memorial discourse of the trauma undergone or on the symbolic value of sites where repression was carried out. Meanwhile, the recent accounts of experiences in camps such as Jiabiangou, the desert-edge twilight zone under a tyrannical administration, have tended to unveil a system and process of dehumanisation in every way comparable to the Gulag: the identification of a symbolic site should go hand-in-hand with nurturing a collective awareness of the catastrophic nature of the 1957 events. But the book does contain an informed rejection of the sophistry of some new left rhetoricians such as Wang Shaoguang, who defend the indefensible with scant regard for historical truth or the suffering of millions of individuals whose lives were broken.
- 6 Translated by N. Jayaram